

Safety Tips for Hanging Exterior Christmas Lights

By Paul Bianchina

One of the joys of the holiday season is the proliferation of outside lights and other decorations that brighten and beautify the neighborhoods. Exterior lighting is safe and easy to work with, but you still need to follow some common-sense safety precautions:

- When selecting lights, extension cords or outside decorations, check the packaging or read the instructions carefully, and look to see that the manufacturer has labeled the item as approved for use in exterior locations. Do not use any item outdoors unless it is designed for exterior use.
- Each year when you get your lights ready to hang, take a moment to check the bulbs, sockets, light cords and extension cords for nicks, cuts, broken insulation or exposed wires. Discard damaged lights and cords.
- Most exterior extension cords have three-prong (grounded) male and female plugs. Do not use any cord if the grounding leg has been removed or damaged.
- Never try to force a three-prong male plug into a two-prong cord or outlet. To properly adapt a three-prong cord to a two-prong outlet, use a UL-approved adapter plug with an attached ground wire. Be sure that the ground wire is connected to a proper ground source, such as a cold water pipe or a grounding rod driven into the ground.
- Many of today's plugs have one leg that is wider than the other one, which is used to maintain the correct grounding polarity throughout the entire electrical system. Never clip or file the wide, polarized plug leg in order to make it fit into an older, non-polarized outlet or cord. Here again, utilize a proper adapter to make the transition.
- When using spotlights for temporary exterior illumination of decorations, use an approved lamp holder to hold the bulb. Most types have a gasket for sealing the bulb in the socket, and some types have a metal or plastic spike attached to simplify staking the light securely to the ground.
- The majority of outdoor light sets sold today utilize a male plug with a tiny fuse inside, which is located in the plug behind a small hinged or sliding cover. Never attempt to bypass or otherwise alter the fuse or the fuse sockets. If a fuse burns out, replacements are included with the light set, or may be purchased at any store where you bought the lights. If the fuse continues to burn out in a short period of time, the cord has a short circuit in it and should be discarded.
- Miniature lights are generally safer than larger bulbs, since they build up less heat. While light strings with larger bulbs are fine for most exterior situations, miniature lights should be used if the light strings are to be placed near materials that may be combustible.
- When connecting two or more strings of lights together, wrap a strip of electrical tape around the plug connections. This prevents the strings from being disconnected, and also protects the connection from the elements. You should also tape the unused female plug at the end of the light run.
- For safe and convenient operation of exterior lights and decorations, use an exterior timer. Some timers operate on a time dial, turning the lights on and off at preselected times of

the day. Other light control timers operate on a photocell, which turns the lights on when the photocell senses that it's dark enough outside. A switch on the photocell allows you to select dusk to dawn operation, or intervals ranging from two to eight hours before the lights shut off. Different types of timers are available at most of the same retail stores that sell the light sets, and here again, be certain they are rated for exterior use.

- Many stores have a variety of hangers that greatly simplify installation of exterior lights, ranging from metal hooks that are nailed into the fascia or other wooden supports to small plastic clips that allow you to attach the lights to a gutter. Select the type of connector that best suits your installation needs. Avoid nailing or stapling the wires in place, since this can easily damage the insulation jacket on the outside of the wire and create corrosion in the wire or a short circuit against the staple.
- Always look for lights, cords and decorations that carry the Underwriter's Laboratories (UL) stamp of approval, which indicates that the product has been rigorously tested and is safe when used as advertised.